



AUDIO

FAQ

Q I buy music on CDs and use my computer to make MP3 files from them. The files are for my own use, but am I breaking the law?

A Legitimate and free software programs such as iTunes and Windows Media Player make it easy to create MP3 files from your own CD collection, yet record companies increasingly distribute music on copy-protected discs to prevent you doing so.

We weren't completely sure whether making your own MP3 files is legal, so we asked the British Phonographic Industry (BPI) for comment. Matt Phillips, the communications manager at the BPI, explained that by creating a copy of the original sound recording you are breaking copyright law. Nobody in the UK has yet been prosecuted for a personal MP3 collection, although the BPI has brought 139 legal cases against people sharing digital music on peer-to-peer networks such as Kazaa. Last March, 23 people settled their cases, paying the BPI up to £4,500 each. As we went to press, two of the five people who chose not to settle had been ordered by the High Court to pay up to £5,000.

Ripping your own CDs to MP3 or any other format is illegal. However, it seems unlikely that the BPI would use its resources to prosecute if the files are strictly for your own use, and equally unlikely that it would find out.

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REVIEW MP3 PLAYER

CREATIVE
Zen Vision:M

RATING ★★

PRICE £235 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.savastore.com

DETAILS <http://uk.europe.creative.com>

Video playback is slowly making its way on to more MP3 players. Last month we reviewed the flash memory-based iRiver U10 – see our *Hotlist* below. Creative's Zen Vision:M is a full-size hard disk player that competes directly with the 30GB iPod Video.

'Full-size' seems an appropriate adjective for the Vision:M. While the iPod is 1.1cm thick and weighs 136g, the Zen player measures almost 2cm and weighs 164g. Even next to the 60GB iPod, which is 1.4cm thick, it feels unfashionably bulky.

Creative supplies the Zen with white earbud headphones, which sound acceptable but produce a slightly muffled sound. They have thicker driver units than others we've tested and feel big and uncomfortable in the ear.

Although Creative has improved this player's controls, it's still one of our least-favourite systems. None of the stiffly sprung buttons seems to be where you'd expect them. Rocking the touch pad navigates left and right through songs, making room for a new short cut button that always seems to be "not applicable here".

The Vision:M displays photos and video on its 6.3cm colour screen. The display's large area and high quality make it a surprisingly adept photo viewer, although we found the player's touch-sensitive scroll bar clumsy when browsing photo folders. The Vision:M supports a wider range of video formats than the iPod and will even play DivX-encoded AVI files. It identifies itself to Windows as a Portable Media Device, so you can copy music and photos using Windows Explorer. We



had some problems copying video content, but we solved these by installing Creative's bundled Media Explorer software.

Copying 500MB of music files to the player took just one minute and 15 seconds. Creative says the Zen's battery will last for 14 hours of music playback, but it switched off after nine hours and 59 minutes when playing a mixture of MP3 and WMA files, and managed slightly less when we repeated the test.

This player's biggest problem is its similarity to the highly desirable iPod. The Zen's video playback support is better implemented and its Plays For Sure certification means you'll have more freedom when buying music online, but it doesn't have the iPod's style, battery life or desirability, and it costs £30 more.

Simon Handby



Extensive video support; clear screen



Uncomfortable headphones; clumsy controls

SPECIFICATIONS Hard disk MP3 player, 30GB capacity, supports MP3, WMA and protected WMA and WAV audio files, JPEG image files, MPEG1, MPEG2, MPEG4-SP, WMV9 and MJPEG video files, USB Hi-Speed interface **Part code** 70PF169000006

HOTLIST REVIEW MP3 PLAYER

IRIVER
U110 1GB

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £126 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.savastore.com

DETAILS www.iriver.eu.com

This is the first MP3 player we've reviewed

with a control system to rival that of the iPod. Most

functions are controlled by rocking the screen in the direction of an icon. The U10 looks and sounds gorgeous. It's better than an iPod Nano, but provides less storage.



SPECIFICATIONS Flash-based MP3 player, 1GB capacity, supports MP3, WMA and protected WMA, WAV and OGG audio files, JPEG image files and AVI movies, USB Hi-Speed interface. **Part code** 3U104X

HOTLIST SOUND CARD

CREATIVE
Sound Blaster X-Fi
XtremeMusic

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £86 inc VAT

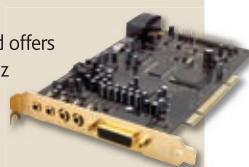
SUPPLIER www.misco.co.uk

DETAILS <http://uk.europe.creative.com>

Creative's new sound card offers high-quality 24-bit, 96KHz sound recording and playback, although you'll need a good set of speakers to hear the sound improvement.

The X-Fi is good for recording music, and has EAX Advanced HD 5.0 sound processing, which makes games that support it more atmospheric.

If you want the best sound on your PC, the X-Fi is better than any onboard sound chip.



SPECIFICATIONS Line, mic and optical S/PDIF inputs, four line (7.1) outputs, midi port, PCI interface. **Part code** 70SB046002010

HOTLIST SURROUND SPEAKER SET

LOGITECH
Z-5500

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £196 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dabs.com

DETAILS www.logitech.co.uk

Logitech's 5.1 Z-5500 speakers have what it takes to satisfy most people's surround-sound needs.

They're powerful enough to shake the house with 505W RMS, and they deliver rich bass thanks to the large subwoofer.

The speakers are THX-certified and come with a DTS and Dolby Digital decoder, so you can plug in a DVD player as well as a PC.



SPECIFICATIONS 5.1 surround sound, 505W RMS, optical and coaxial digital inputs, three stereo inputs, Dolby Digital and DTS decoder **Part code** 970115-0120



REVIEW IPOD SPEAKER DOCKS

LOGITECH
mm22

RATING ★★

PRICE £24 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.savastore.comDETAILS www.logitech.co.ukLOGITECH
mm50

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £70 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dabs.comDETAILS www.logitech.co.ukALTEC LANSING
iM7

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £178 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dabs.comDETAILS www.alteclansing.com

In this month's Labs on page 195, we review 18 sets of speakers that are suitable for a PC or portable audio device. However, if you've got an iPod, there are many amplified speaker docks around that offer you a little more.

Logitech's mm22 is an inexpensive dock. It's supplied with an AC adaptor and can also run from four AAA batteries. It's marketed for use with an iPod but connects to the headphone socket using a standard 3.5mm stereo cable, so you could use it with any player. In fact, there's little to distinguish the mm22 from a standard

pair of portable speakers, other than its cradle that holds any iPod.

Sound from the four 1" drivers is adequate, but there isn't much bass or volume. If you need a set of portable speakers and aren't bothered about looks, we'd recommend the Cyber Acoustics CA-MP30 speakers (see page 198).

The other two products reviewed here use a line-out audio signal from the iPod's dock interface. Logitech's mm50 has a socket for Apple's data cable, so you can use it to synchronise your iPod.

Altec Lansing's iM7 speaker set has S-video and composite outputs, which enable you to display photos or video from a newer iPod on your TV, but it doesn't have a data port. This seems like an oversight, but then the Bose SoundDock we reviewed in *What's New, Shopper* October 2005 doesn't have one either. The iM7 doesn't sound as good as the SoundDock, but it's £70 cheaper and can run from D-cell batteries. It looks great, but it's a bit big and heavy to carry around.

The mm50, however, is compact enough to transport in its supplied semi-rigid case and has an internal battery that Logitech says will last for seven hours. Although it's a little quiet, the mm50 has a nice sound. If you don't need portability, though, we'd suggest you opt for one of the desktop speaker sets in our Labs test instead. Still, this is easily the best value speaker dock we've reviewed.

Simon Handby

SPECIFICATIONS Logitech mm22 Stereo portable speakers, line input. **Part code** 970159-0120 Logitech mm50 Stereo portable speakers, line input and iPod dock. **Part code** 970173-0120 Altec Lansing iM7 Stereo portable speakers, line input and iPod dock, 50W RMS. **Part code** iM7

HOTLIST MP3 PLAYER

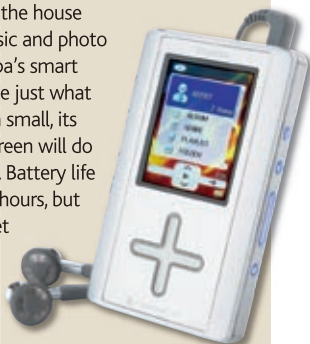
TOSHIBA
Gigabeat F20

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £175 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dabs.comDETAILS www.gigabeat.toshiba.co.uk

If you can't leave the house without your music and photo collections, Toshiba's smart Gigabeat might be just what you need. Though small, its 320x240-pixel screen will do your snaps proud. Battery life is an excellent 15 hours, but you should budget for a headphone upgrade if you want the best sound quality.



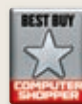
SPECIFICATIONS 20GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface, MP3, WMA and WAV playback, JPEG display. **Part code** MEG-F20

HOTLIST HEADPHONES

SENNHEISER
PXC 250

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £70 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dolphinmusic.co.ukDETAILS www.sennheiser.co.uk

These headphones use active electronics to cancel out environmental sounds. They don't do much to reduce unwelcome speech or music, but they are astonishingly effective on a plane or train. They sound great with plenty of bass and are comfortable to wear. Aside from their bulky battery case, these headphones are ideal for travel.



SPECIFICATIONS Stereo-active noise-cancelling headphones, frequency response 10-21,000Hz, sensitivity 106dB. **Part code** PXC 250

CHOOSING AN...

MP3
PLAYER

Pick up the beat with our guide to buying an MP3 player

1 Below you'll see a typical specification for an MP3 player that costs £30. Using flash memory means it can be very small and light, but its 128MB capacity provides room for just a couple of albums of MP3s encoded at 128Kbit/s. It's worth buying a player with 512MB or more to provide greater listening choice while on the move. Cheap players often cut corners when it comes to sound quality, so approach these with caution.



2 If you don't mind something bulkier, consider devices that use alternative storage technology. CD-based MP3 players read MP3s burned on a CD-R, but are no longer worth the money. Hard disk-based players have up to 60GB capacity, so they can hold hundreds of albums; prices start at £150. Players based on tiny 1" hard disks of between 1.5GB and 6GB capacity cost from £100, and provide an excellent balance of portability and capacity.

3 With the exception of CD-based players, which read pre-recorded discs, most players need a PC interface to upload MP3 files. USB is common, but USB Hi-Speed and FireWire give speedier transfers.

4 Battery life varies between two and 50 hours. Hard disk players are the most power-hungry and benefit from a lithium-ion battery, which is light and easy to recharge.

5 Many players play WMA files, Microsoft's rival format to MP3. Hard disk players may also play WAV files for full CD-quality audio.

FILL IN YOUR SPECS HERE

(Recommended minimum in grey)

CAPACITY: 128MB

TECHNOLOGY: Flash memory

INTERFACE: USB

BATTERY: Disposable

SUPPORTED FORMATS: MP3, WMA

EXTRA FEATURES: